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ABSTRACT

The development of a language development program for limited-English-proficient Spanish-speaking students in a New Mexico junior high school are described. Initially, the program was organized in response to sudden heavy enrollment of non-English-speaking students, and was intended to teach them English. In subsequent years, through application of research findings and theory on bilingualism and second language learning, the program has focused on developing literacy in both English and native Spanish. Currently, students spend two years in the beginning-level program and a year at the intermediate level, and some students remain in the junior high school an additional year to take advantage of the program. A beginning student's daily schedule includes: four periods of language arts, including instruction in oral and written English as a second language (ESL), Spanish and English reading, and Spanish for native speakers; math at one of two levels, taught in Spanish; and an activity class, usually physical education. At the intermediate level, students are systematically mainstreamed into the regular curriculum. All continue in appropriate native Spanish classes and mediated ESL instruction and most have math instruction in Spanish. The program has been successful in teaching and retaining students. (MSE)

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A Program for Limited English Speaking Students: Necessity is the Mother of ESL Programs

Patricia T. Johnson

Paper presented at the National Association of Secondary School Principals Conference, March 4-8, 1988, Anaheim, CA

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A Program for Limited English Speaking Students
subtitled: Necessity is the Mother of ESL Programs

by

Patricia T. Johnson

THE PAST

In many respects New Mexico is slow in keeping up with trends of the United States. Residents often note that it takes ten-years for a national fad to catch on in the state -- by then it is no longer a fad. In one area, however, New Mexico has been forced to be a leader; that has been in providing an education for language minority children. Historically, there has always been a large Spanish speaking population in the state; in fact, the Spaniards were in the Southwest before the East coast was colonized; Anglos and the English language are relative newcomers in New Mexico. Bilingualism has been a way of life for many of the state's residents, and the state constitution guarantees a free education to all, regardless of the language they speak.

Questions about cultural sensitivity and biases, about bilingual versus ESL (English as a Second Language) educational programs represent relatively new inquiry in many regions of the country; they have been posed in

Southwestern schools for decades. Unfortunately for language minority children, however, answers to these questions often have been very political; and programs designed to meet students' needs have emerged slowly. Nothing suggests, however, that answers will come more quickly or less politically in those states with relatively recent, large language minority populations. Adopting program models from the Southwest may prove to be both expedient and effective for schools in these states; the Language Development Program at Sierra Junior High in Las Cruces, New Mexico, is one which has potential use for other secondary schools with similar language minority populations.

The Sierra program was not initiated from years of work; there were no needs-assessments, task forces, or literature reviews. A much more compelling motivator was present: on the first day of school four years ago, approximately forty students who spoke only Spanish showed up to register. Because the assistant principal was new to the school, it became her responsibility to work with the new students while the principal was busy with many of the usual opening-of-school activities. She had one day to design a program, staff it, and write schedules for the newly arrived students.

Previously, there had been a few non- and limited

English proficient (LEP) students in this junior high school of nearly a thousand students. There was one bilingual certified teacher on staff; he had two bilingual aides assigned to work with him. There were also a few teachers who spoke both English and Spanish, although they were not bilingual certified, Only one of nearly forty teachers had had any training in teaching English as a second language (ESL); the assistant principal, while earning a degree in English, had one class in linguistics which dealt with ESL instruction -- that was twenty years earlier. Nonetheless, everyone on staff was viewed as a resource.

An initial decision was made to abandon past practices. Previously, LEP students had been scheduled in two classes taught in Spanish by the bilingual certified teacher, and the two aides accompanied students to four regular classes to translate material. Though the absence of ESL classes was a pedagogical reason for the change, equally compelling was the pragmatic reason that the number of new LEP students made previous practices impossible to manage.

Practical considerations also played heavily in the creation of the new program; staffing decisions were made on the basis of who was available. With adjustments in the master schedule, one period from a social studies teacher's

schedule and one period from an English teacher's schedule were freed. Both teachers spoke English and Spanish, and the English teacher was the one with some training in ESL techniques. Both agreed with the assistant principal that all new LEP students students should be scheduled together for two hours, one hour with each of them. The students would then be scheduled into regular math classes and regular physical education classes. The reasoning was that math was a universal language and LEP students could get by without assistance. Physical education classes, it was argued, would give students opportunities to speak English in an informal setting. The remaining two periods of the LEP students' schedules would be handled by the two aides under the supervision of the bilingual certified teacher.

Though educational planners would rightfully scorn the order of events, the needs-assessment and review of the literature were done after the students began attending school. It became apparent very quickly that this group of students had had few opportunities for formal schooling. Most were very poor, and while Spanish was the only language used in their homes, few could read or write it. The assessment of the students and a review of research in second language acquisiton and pedagogy provided direction for changes in the program.

THE RESEARCH

The research of Jim Cummins of the Ontario Institute for Studies, Toronto, played heavily into the review and ultimate modification of the original Language Development Program at Sierra. In addition, Stephen Krashen's work in reading and in "comprehensible input" gave substance to the reading component, and the "Total Physical Response" (TPR) work of James Asher lent direction for instructional methods. Also, Elba Maldonado from the University of Texas at Austin (currently with the Hartford Public Schools in Connecticut) presented some interpretations of the works of Cummins and Reuven Feuerstein which greatly influenced content and philosophy of the program.

Two different aspects of Cummins' research were relevant to Sierra's program; one had to do with language deficits and the other with language analysis. In the area of language deficits, Cummins found that by the time they start school, children from middle class homes had considerably more language experiences than impoverished children. Children from poverty level homes with a primary language different from that of the middle-class society were the most language limited and often had been categorized as "special education students." Cummins emphasized that the language limitation pertained not only

to the vernacular language but to the students' native language as well. His study of language itself was also valuable. He examined the difference between "social language" which is cognitively undemanding and heavily contextualized and "academic language" which is cognitively demanding and context reduced -- and much more difficult for LEP children to learn. His research showed that it takes on the average five to seven years for a student to approach grade norms in second language academic skills, but the same student will show peer appropriate conversational skills in about two years. Both areas of Cummins's research were heavily considered in modifications of the Language Development Program.

Three aspects of Stephen Krashen's research bolstered the Sierra program. First, his research showed that adults reading to children and children self-selecting reading materials are superior avenues for development of literacy. He also found that the development of solid literacy in the first language is an essential step to the development of literacy in a second language. Finally, he discussed that any second language must be taught in a "natural" and "comprehensible" context; he thus rejected the skill building approach to language teaching wherein students must first learn grammar, spelling, and punctuation rules before they are allowed to read and write stories. His work refined

the reading portion of the ESL instruction.

James Asher's material supported the work of Cummins and Krashen and gave very specific methods for teachers to use to develop oral language. His "Total Physical Response" methods allowed the teachers to temporarily discard traditional text materials and help students to develop language skills by listening and doing. He confirmed that students learn language long before they are willing to speak it, and he gave credibility to the idea that learning a language usually includes a "silent period" where students are not inclined to speak. Like Krashen, Asher believes that language is most easily learned when stress is minimized.

Elba Maldonado advocated using the students' native language for teaching content concepts. Like Cummins, she did not diminish the importance of students' learning English in the United States, but she noted the absurdity of teaching difficult concepts to children in a language which they have only minimally learned. She also discussed "mediated learning experiences" based on the work of Reuven Feuerstein. Logically, she noted, students learn much more from their environment if they have been prepared to learn. She recommended that teachers act as "mediators" in the classroom much as Feuerstein sees the family as the

mediators of cultures.

Others also provided research relevant to Sierra's program. Hillson and Bongo's Continuous-Progress Education supported grouping students by achievement rather than by traditional grade levels. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle and Ann Fatham supported teaching a second language to junior high aged students. They showed that persons in the age group of 12- to 15-years learn a second language significantly better than either younger or older persons. Anastasi and Cordova refuted that idea of "submersion" programs. They found that Puerto Rican children who had suddenly been required to cope with an all-English school situation 'insulated' themselves by becoming passive and apathetic in their attitudes. Lambert and Gardner showed that motivation and attitudes are very important dimensions in learning of a second language. When it was found to be was out of line with research findings, the Sierra program was modified.

In summary, both a careful assessment of the students who had been part of the program and a synthesis of relevant research support tenets for the current program. They are summarized below:

1. Students can and must leave the program knowing the English language at both a social and an academic level. The destruction of their native language is not only counter-productive to that

end but is also harmful to their overall personal and academic development.

2. Students who can read and write in their native language can much more easily learn to read and write in a second language.

3. Learning academic concepts and thinking skills in one's native language and "translating" them to a second language is more efficient and effective than attempting to learn the same concepts and skills in a language in which one has only limited skills.

4. A second language is more efficiently and effectively learned in classes which are designed for that purpose.

5. Traditional school subjects can provide context for mastery of skills in either one's native language or in a second language.

6. All aspects of academic language must be considered in language development programs or students are not likely to be successful in school.

Though on the surface the current program appears to be much like the one of four years ago, in fact, these tenets dramatically change the instructional program.

THE PRESENT

Though it is impossible to pinpoint an exact date, sometime during the first year a philosophical change occurred in the Sierra Program. When it began four years ago, the primary purpose was to teach LEP students English; every year subsequent to the first, the goal has been to encourage students to become highly literate in both English and Spanish. Though the current Language Development Program looks similar on paper to the one put together in twenty-four hours four years ago, form and substance has been added to every hour to meet the new program goals. An intermediate level program has also been added. Most students spend two years in beginning level classes, and at least one year at the intermediate level; some students spend an additional year at the junior high because the high school does not have a similar program.

In the current beginning level program students receive four periods a day of language arts which contain instruction in ESL and in Spanish for native speakers. One period is a class in which the primary activity is the development of spoken English. The basis for the writing program, which forms a second hour of the beginner's schedule, is "The Writing Process"; this material is also used successfully for students in the regular junior high program. Both of these classes incorporate "mediated

learning experiences" to assist the students not only in their school life but in their community life as well. These two classes might be classified as purely ESL.

A third hour of the beginning program focuses on reading. There is ample material in both Spanish and English, and students are encouraged to read in both languages at school and at home. Because most of the students' parents want their children to learn English, they must be convinced that it is desirable for students to read in Spanish.

A fourth hour for all beginning students is a substantial change from the original program; it is a class in Spanish for native speakers. While the primary goal is this class is to teach or refine the students' ability to read and write in Spanish, other benefits are also derived. The students' self-esteem is usually greatly enhanced because they usually do very well. Associated with the Spanish class is an extra-curricular club which gives the newly arrived LEP students a chance to socialize with other students in the school on an equal, if not superior, footing.

A fifth hour of the beginning student's schedule is math. Currently, Sierra has two levels of math taught in

Spanish; ideally, there should be more. The teacher is certified in both math and in Spanish so in the two-level math structure, he is able to individualize programs as needed. With math instruction delivered in Spanish, many students have advanced several grade levels in one year.

The sixth period of the beginning student's program is an activity class, usually physical education. This class gives LEP students a chance to be with students from the entire school in a "cognitively undmanding, highly contextualized" setting. In the activity classes, the "silent" period, which by now the entire Sierra staff accepts as being okay, usually ends very quickly for most LEP students; they find conversation fairly easy in the informal setting.

The intermediate program grew from the success of the beginning program. Students needed different classes when they mastered moderately good social language -- to borrow Cummins' term. They still, however, need to work on literacy in both English and Spanish, and most do not possess sufficiently strong English language skills to survive in English-only academic classes. As with the beginning level, the intermediate program is comprehensive and integrated, but students in this level are systematically mainstreamed into the regular curriculum.

All intermediate students continue in the appropriate level of Spanish for Native Speakers classes; the approach of the bilingual social studies program forces students to speak, read and write both Spanish and English. Direct ESL instruction occurs in one class with continued "mediated learning activities," and indirect ESL instruction is delivered in another hour. Students are scheduled into regular classes to practice their English; they are not graded for mastery of the course content, but rather they receive a grade in "English application." They can receive a content grade instead if they learn the material taught in the course, and in this non-threatening arrangement, many do.

Most intermediate students continue to need math instruction delivered in Spanish. Technical explanations and word problems in English still greatly inhibit the performance of many LEP students in mathematics. Students who are able to function in a regular math class may receive tutorial help whenever they need it.

The sixth hour of the intermediate level students' program is an elective of their choice. The ESL teacher assists students in their selection. Because there is not a bilingual science class available, many begin their science

program during their elective hour. The ESL teacher helps them with the technical vocabulary in whatever elective they choose.

The acceptance of the philosophical change in the program occurred not only with the staff directly involved in teaching the LEP students but with the teachers who work with them in regular classes. The understanding and support by the entire staff has contributed greatly to the success of the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The sub-title of this article may be more descriptive of its content than the title. As was already noted, the Sierra program didn't start with volumes of research; it started with kids who needed an education. Like many situations requiring instant decisions, mistakes were made the first year, but by now they have been corrected. A far greater mistake would have been to do nothing. Four years later the students would probably be dropouts with English language skills as deficient as they were when they entered the program. Instead, many continue their efforts, struggling with the academic language -- their social language developed just a Cummins predicted. What is critical is the fact that they have remained in school and that they are learning both language and subject matter --

the keys to successful schooling for the linguistically/culturally different student.